

**USAG Giessen Issue Paper**  
**2007 Army in Europe Army Family Action Plan Conference**

**Issue: #GSN-01-07: Matching Thrift Savings Plan Contributions**

**Scope:** The Federal Government does not match service member's contributions to their Thrift Savings Plan. Currently, federal employees receive matching funds up to 5% of their TSP monthly investments as an incentive and benefit to employment. Matching service member's Thrift Savings Plan investments would encourage recruitment, retention, savings, and make the military comparable to their federal employee counterparts.

**Recommendation:**

1. Modify the current Thrift Savings Plan contribution program to allow service members to receive matching funds similar to the present federal employee program.
2. Advise service members on benefits of long-term financial investments.

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**Issue: #GSN-02-07: Lack of Required Downrange Equipment**

**Scope:** Required safety equipment that has proven to reduce loss of life is not available to all units deployed to combat zones. Special equipment such as the warlock IED jamming device and extra armor for vehicles promised is not reaching units downrange in a timely manner. Often service members feel compelled to purchase their own safety equipment. Improvised and makeshift solutions, such as duct taping flack jackets to the outside of their vehicles, are being used for safety purposes until new and updated supplies arrive. Consequently, when newer equipment and weapon systems become inoperable, the soldiers may go six months or longer before service teams fix the problem, leaving the soldiers vulnerable and at risk.

**Recommendation:**

1. Ensure all service members have required safety equipment in a timely manner as promised prior to deployment to a combat zone.
2. Ensure maintenance teams repair inoperable equipment in a timely manner, especially when the soldiers are in a combat zone and at risk.

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**Issue: #GSN-03-07: Inconsistent Military Education Opportunities**

**Scope:** Military education opportunities are available but difficult to obtain. Command support of soldiers striving to further their education is inconsistent. Commanders often must approve class as the official place of duty for the soldier before he/she is allowed to enroll in courses. Due to official duties that arise, soldiers are not always able to attend class. Scheduling and access of online courses is subject to instructor discretion and education center availability. Inconsistent command support negatively impacts soldiers and retention as they are not able to use the higher education incentive for which they enlisted.

**Recommendation:** Enforce the policy allowing soldiers to attend class as their official place of duty, with the commander's prior approval.

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**Issue: #GSN-04-07: Priority Placement for Widowed Government Employees**

**Scope:** Spouses of active duty service members lose their military spouse preference if their sponsor dies. Priority Placement eligibility for these spouses is available only at the service member's Home of Record. Widowed spouses frequently relocate to areas other than the original Home of Record as a result of the death. Ineligibility for Priority Placement preference causes job search obstacles. This lack of job opportunity preference generates excessive hardship and added emotional stress to the spouse and family recovering from the loss of the service member.

**Recommendation:**

1. Change current policy to allow widowed spouse to retain their military spouse preference.
2. Allow spouses of deceased active duty service members to choose which state to claim as their home of record for employment purposes.

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**Issue: #GSN-05-07: Space-A Flight Priority for College Visits**

**Scope:** Currently, family members living overseas who have a child trying to decide which college to attend, receive no assistance regarding visits to prospective campuses. Stateside families have the option of driving to various colleges for these visits, as the student contemplates which college would make the best choice for his/her future. Dependents living overseas facing the same dilemma do not have this option. In addition, college scouts rarely visit high schools overseas. Students either must go to the campuses and meet with the scouts on their own or send videos. Often, families cannot afford to pay out of pocket for this trip, relying on Space-A flights. The priority status for families in this situation is too low and they frequently get “bumped” from flights or find it difficult to get both students and guardians on the same flight.

**Recommendation:** Allow students living OCONUS one trip accompanied by a guardian to visit prospective campuses, given the student must provide a confirmation letter from the college regarding appointment and/or interview dates.

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**Issue: #GSN-06-07: Army Knowledge Storage Space**

**Scope:** Army Knowledge Online (AKO) does not provide enough storage space for users. Military personnel are encouraged to utilize Army Knowledge Online as their primary Internet provider due to security issues. When deployed downrange, AKO is often the only source of communication between service members and their families. Having limited storage space causes undue stress to service members who are already under extremely stressful situations. Archiving files to reduce storage capacity is not currently available.

**Recommendation:**

1. Increase the AKO storage space.
2. Implement an archive system that does not decrease the allotted AKO storage space.

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**Issue: #GSN-07-07: Inconsistent Curriculum Availability**

**Scope:** Military students face inconsistency involving available classes as they relocate from school to school. Once a course of study has been established, students desire a continuation of class options that are in line with their current studies. Many classes are pre-requisites to future courses needed for graduation. These graduation requirements vary from state to state and from school to school. Juniors that relocate their senior year often can not meet the new schools graduation requirements because certain classes were not offered at their previous school. These courses include math, science, foreign language, and vocational skill classes just to name a few.

**Recommendation:**

1. Implement a policy where gaining school addresses individual student files to determine if credit can be awarded to satisfy new graduation requirements, without penalizing the student for previous schools lack of course options.
2. Provide on-line classes that will allow students to continue previous course of study, such as a foreign language, if not offered at gaining school.

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**Issue: #GSN-08-07: DoDDS-E Attendance Policy**

**Scope:** The DoDEA attendance policy is not specific or stringent enough to ensure the best education for our military children. Parents are allowed to make choices about tardies and absences that they would not make in a normal school system, hiding behind the common belief that because military families have unusual schedules, parents and children shouldn't be held as accountable for attending school as the average American family. A good attendance policy should address poor attendance immediately, not after a child has missed weeks of school. A good policy is necessary to motivate parents who are not motivated on their own to get their children to school on time. Normally, family vacations are unexcused absences, but schools are already doing a good job of working with responsible parents who do balance education with the soldier's schedule.

**Recommendation:**

1. Create a DoDEA attendance policy similar to top-ranked school systems in CONUS.
2. Redefine what are considered "excused" and "unexcused" absences in order to compensate for the unique military lifestyle.
  1. Define the effect of unexcused tardies on the Progress Report, possibly equating them to unexcused absences.
  2. Define the number of excused absences an enrolled child can have, encouraging parents to keep track of days missed and promote better planning for vacations, appointments, etc.

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**Issue: #GSN-09-07: Army Knowledge Online Customer Service**

**Scope:** Army Knowledge Online (AKO) accounts are a challenge to maintain for service members and families, especially during deployments. AKO is marketed as the primary web-based online service, providing a more secure avenue of communication compared to other options available. Common Access Cards (CAC) are required to update accounts such as passwords. Often during deployments, access to computers and/or card readers is limited. Normally, a time constraint is required for implementing updates. Due to the downrange mission, service members often cannot meet these time constraints.

**Recommendation:**

1. Eliminate CAC card requirements for AKO users.
2. Extend the update period on AKO accounts during a service member's deployment

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**Issue: #GSN-10-07: DoDDS Curriculum Standards**

**Scope:** DoDDS curriculum standards do not meet national guidelines. Students are not being challenged by the current system. Frequently, students leave Europe to find they are severely behind their peers when they transfer to a stateside school. Often those students who excel do so because teachers have gone above and beyond the required standards. Currently, a DoDDS committee only updates curriculums when a new textbook is introduced, which on average occurs approximately once every five years.

**Recommendation:**

1. Challenge the teachers to encourage students to excel and perform at higher individual levels by offering incentive pay.
2. Review curriculum for all subjects annually.

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**Issue: #GSN-11-07: Installation Sponsored Driver's Education Class**

**Scope:** Soldiers, family members, and students cannot acquire driving permits or licenses while living in Germany unless they have previously been issued a stateside license. Each state has different requirements as to how long a driver must hold a permit before being allowed to apply for an actual license. Anyone holding a stateside permit or provisional license, unable to obtain a state license due to these time requirements, falls into this dilemma. Permits and provisional licenses are not valid when applying for a USAREUR license. Not being able to apply for a license while living overseas causes increased stress. Obtaining a German license is also quite expensive.

**Recommendation:**

1. Provide a driving course for soldiers, family members and students, which will allow them to acquire their USAREUR license through the military, enabling them to drive in Germany.
2. Exempt soldiers, family members and students from holding a stateside license before being issued a USAREUR license if they have completed an approved driving course on a designated installation.

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**Issue: #GSN-12-07: Long-Term Combat Stress Evaluations**

**Scope:** Tracking soldiers for combat stress following the initial 90-day period after returning from a combat zone is inadequate. Due to the large number of soldiers that permanently change station or end their service to their country, or retire following a lengthy deployment, consistent follow-up treatment for combat stress symptoms is often difficult to track. In essence, the soldier is not receiving needed treatment. Often symptoms do not occur until six months or longer following re-deployment.

**Recommendation:**

3. Mandate six-month screenings for all service members to update medical records with an emphasis on mental health care.
4. Verify date of last deployment, status of mental health treatment, if any, and schedule future treatment as needed.

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**Issue: #GSN-13-07: Teen E-mail website**

**Scope:** Military teens do not have an exclusively secure website enabling them to chat on-line with other teens across the military. Being a teenager today is very difficult but being a teenager in the military can be even more challenging. With frequent moves and parent(s) constantly deploying, being able to talk with other teens in the same situation or with those who have gone through a similar experiences can be very helpful. Establishing a teen website can be the communication avenue between teens in locations throughout the world.

**Recommendation:** Establish a website where military teens can chat online and e-mail other teens, similar to MySpace.com but exclusively for military teens.

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**Issue: #GSN-14-07: Tuition for Non-Sponsored Families**

**Scope:** Non-sponsored US citizens living overseas must pay to send their children to DoDDS. If a soldier retires or chooses to end their military service and continue to live in Europe, or if a non-government sponsored company employs a person overseas (hence a contractor), he/she must pay for their children to attend American schools. Financial hardship is often the end result, especially for families with multiple children. Service members are being penalized after serving their country so proudly.

**Recommendation:**

1. Allow all US citizens to enroll their children in DoDDS at no expense to the parents while living overseas.
2. Offer discounts for families with multiple children in this category.

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